"A resolution was passed without one dissenting colony," wrote the 40-year-old lawyer and revolutionary, John Adams, to his long-suffering wife, Abigail, "that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states."

A great question settled. And a great celebration occasioned.

Of that momentous day, Adams wrote, "I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward for evermore."

July 4, 1776, of course.

Wrong.

It was July 2 — 219 years ago today — that Adams so fervently believed would hold the glory for generations to come. It was on the second day of that sweltering month that the Second Continental Congress, in Philadelphia assembled, adopted the resolution for independence put forward by the Virginia planter, Richard Henry Lee. For the single-purposed mind of Adams, who would become the second president of an as-yet unformed United States of America, the adoption was the act completed. All else would be detail and paperwork.

It was two days later, after the 20-odd lawyers, four doctors, one clergyman and assorted merchants, manufacturers and plantation owners had wrung its phraseology through the tortures of a committee-of-the-whole, that the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson's master birth-write of this nation, became the flesh, muscle and sinew of Lee's resolution.

Jefferson wrote it, at Adams' insistence. One account gave Adams' reasoning as follows: "Reason First — You are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason Second — I am obnoxious, suspected and unpopular [Adams had defended the British soldiers accused six years before in the "Boston Massacre"]. Reason Third — you can write 10 times better than I can."

But it was Adams who so eloquently argued its merits before the Congress while its author sat quietly, making notations and alterations to the draft copy. John Hancock, president of the Congress, on the Fourth of July signed the corrected and amended text, with Charles Thompson's witness the only other signature on the document. It wasn't until Aug. 2 that the final, historic version of the Declaration, by then at Congress' instruction "fairly engrossed [written in large, formal script] on parchment," was ready for the 56 signatories to "mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor." It is a romanticized portrayal of that scene in John Trumbull's famous painting that has become the accepted, if not totally accurate, image of the hour. Thus the adoption date of "The Unanimous Declaration Of The Thirteen United States of America" became the high holy day in America's civil religion of patriotism, the date wherein all those celebratory events that Adams foresaw and more would unfold each year.

There is no better week to settle in with a copy of the Declaration and savor some of the finest English-language prose of the 18th — or any other — century. And, while you are at it, consider the premise and the product of that document.

The premise is the core of American political philosophy: the "self-evident" truths that "all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness; That, to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed. . . ."

And, although it is not to be undertaken lightly, when "a long train of abuses and usurpations . . . evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government and to provide new guards for their future security." Having set up the ground

Continued on Page 17

By Jim Strang

Declaring Our Independence

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